A Positive Focus Including All Youth

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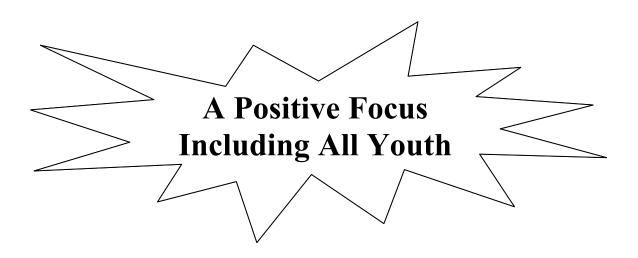
A Positive Focus
Including All Youth

Youth development programs that work are open to all youth.
They recognize their job as not only preventing risky behaviors, but also promoting positive, healthy ones in their place. They know that problem-free is not the same thing as fully prepared. They aim beyond short-term, crisis-oriented, or symptom-oriented activities to those which address underlying problems by building competencies. **They are holistic, focusing on body, mind, and soul.** Thus they do not seek a "quick fix," but rather more long-term resiliency and resourcefulness, equipping young people with life skills and providing positive alternatives to risky behaviors.

"I know! I know!! I hear it all the time. 'At-risk youth.' (What does that mean anyway?) Dropouts. Teen suicide. Teens killing teens. Teen moms. Gangs. Crack. Alcohol. Cigarettes. Lost generations. It all gets so depressing.

"So I look for the positive side, and it's not found easily. It is not on the evening news. Not in the daily newspaper. It doesn't come from the government and private groups that collect data and provide us with mountains of statistics."
-- Lowell Overby
YMCA of the USA

Programs that work recognize that the more young people's needs are met, the more likely they are to gain competency.
Effective programs seek to develop young people's character, confidence, competence, citizenship, and connectedness. The basic skills and social capital needed in today's world extend beyond the traditional "3 Rs." Effective programs meet these needs by increasing abilities to problem-solve, to integrate and apply knowledge, to work cooperatively with others, to develop versatility and values, and to take on responsibility. From the very beginning, in their program design, they provide young people with a sense of competence, a sense of usefulness, a sense of power and influence, and a sense of belonging. Programs that work engage youth in learning about their world and their role in shaping it.

So how can you be sure your program is positive? Look at the specific activities you will be providing youth and see if you can answer these questions:

- What elements of my program contribute to a young person's **sense of safety and structure**?
- How does my program provide youth with a **sense of belonging and membership**?
- Which activities contribute to a young person's **sense of self-worth**? Are there activities that have the potential to make some participants feel worse about themselves? Does my program give youth a chance to contribute to others?
- What is my program doing to give youth participants **meaningful roles and a sense of control over their lives**? Have I involved them in planning? Are there opportunities for them to practice decision-making?
- What does my program do to promote a **sense of closeness**? Have I specifically thought about creating opportunities for youngsters to develop relationships with other youth and with adults?
- In what areas does my program build a **sense of competence and mastery**? What will a young person learn to do? What skills will my program increase? What will they feel proud of after they participate? Will they acquire under-standing in areas such as **health, vocational awareness, and citizenship**? Will they gain **personal and social skills**? Are there activities that will contribute to their **reasoning and creativity**? How will activities build **character, values, and a sense of personal responsibility**?

Perhaps most importantly, programs that work are for all youth. They do not require money or status. They do not require a child to wear a negative label, such as "at-risk," "troubled," "handicapped," "delinquent," or "poor" before receiving service. They do not even require good character. They help guide those who may be in danger of acquiring or already have unacceptable habits and attitudes, as well as those who already have outstanding character and behavior. **Young people are not served because they are problems but because they are youth.**

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS:

- Looking at a child's deficits rather than assets
- A sense of scarcity; thinking we can only serve those who are most in need or at risk
- Negative labeling